



# Nature Journeys

By Vince Pinto

## April's Lack Of Showers Brings Our Succulent Flowers

Here it comes folks. May is upon us and with it comes our yearly oven. Given the blessed relief of elevation we surely don't suffer mercurial extremes as do Phoenix and Tucson. Still, hot is hot. Despite decent winter rains this year, soon the land will be mostly parched and desiccated. April was mostly dry as well, laying waste to my childhood maxim of "April showers bring May flowers." This was a fitting paradigm on the East Coast, but certainly not here!

Instead, our drought months have created an evolutionary niche filled in part by the very plants that help characterize these arid lands. Many members of two plant families have evolved to take advantage of our soaring temperatures and perhaps a corresponding lack of competition for pollinators from other flowers. May and June are months dominated by the blossoms of the Cactaceae and the Asparagaceae. All cacti are succulents, as are many members of the asparagus family. Hence they can energetically and hydrologically afford to use their accounts of these precious resources during the months that tax most other plants beyond the ability to reproduce.

Among the cacti keep a keen eye peeled for the conspicuous flowers of prickly pears and their cousins, the chollas. The flowers of both

plants.

The lion's share of cacti species are pollinated by native bees. Unlike the foreign European honeybee, these species are mainly solitary. Foraging bees collect copious quantities of cholla and prickly pear pollen to feed their larvae, often in underground chambers. In fact, some cholla and prickly pear flowers emanate a scent reminiscent of damp earth, perhaps luring in the bees by mimicking the odor of their subterranean domiciles! Watch for our legion of bee species at the blooms of prickly pears, as well as those of cane and jumping chollas near Patagonia. Look long and hard, as so numerous and dense are the stamens, that some bees literally are engulfed by them, disappearing temporarily from sight! This is likely what the cacti have in mind, as the stamens are triggered to converge upon the bees as they brush against them.

Coinciding with this visual onslaught of cacti are the sexual antics of yuccas, beargrass, sotol and the agaves. Each of these genera has evolved a different means by which to attract reproductive partners. The yuccas - mountain, banana, and soaptree hereabouts - have a symbiotic relationship with yucca moths. There is one species of moth per species of yucca. So co-evolved are they that neither can exist without the other. The moths do not accidentally polli-

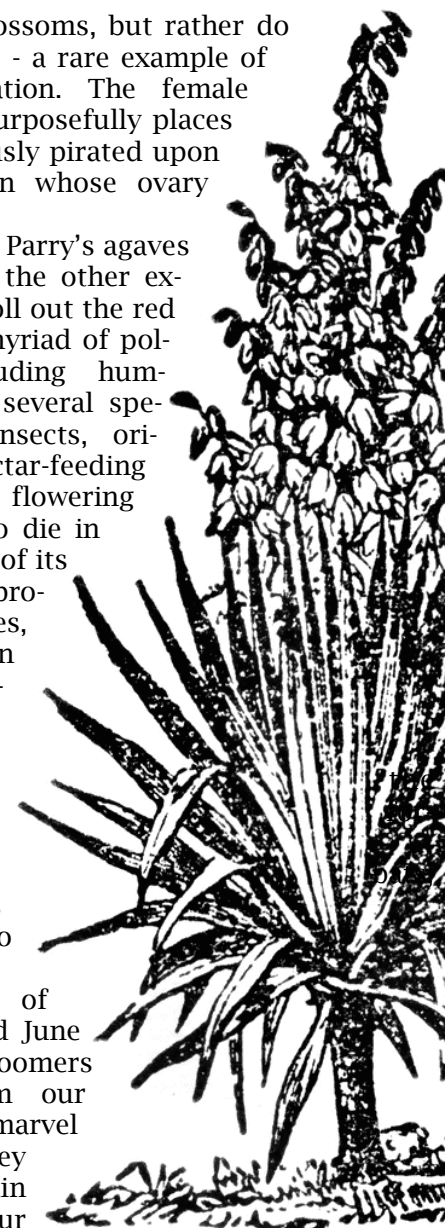
nate yucca blossoms, but rather do it "knowingly" - a rare example of active pollination. The female yucca moth purposefully places pollen previously pirated upon a pistil within whose ovary she'll lay eggs.

Palmer and Parry's agaves have gone to the other extreme. They roll out the red carpet for a myriad of pollinators including hummingbirds of several species, many insects, orioles, and nectar-feeding bats. Hence a flowering agave, soon to die in the aftermath of its passionate reproductive throes, throws an enormous pollinator party.

Sotol and beargrass go middle route, going the birds and luring legions of insects in to do the deed.

Seek all of these May and June specialty bloomers as you roam our haunts and marvel at how they thrive within the worst our climate has to offer.

Vincent Pinto and his wife, Claudia, run Raven's Way Wild Journeys. They offer local tours dedicated to the preservation of the incredible biodiversity in the Sky Islands.



## OUR WILD NEIGHBORS TRACKING QUIZ

Submitted by the Mowry Tracking Team

If you have seen the tracks of this animal you may have thought they were tracks of a German Shepherd or other large dog. If you have been lucky enough to see the actual animal you may have thought it was a very large coyote. There have been a few sightings in the area in the past several years; have you been one of the lucky ones?



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